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ABSTRACT

Good writing is good sentences. It is a simple truth that many in the business of teaching writing have strayed from. Good writing is a first sentence that makes a reader want to read the second sentence, a second sentence that makes a reader want to read the third, and so on. Erika Lindemann suggests that certain types of sentence instruction can be a waste of time, but that sentence grammar is pivotal to any professional success. Writers such as Anthony Burgess, Don Murray, and Stephen Pinker communicate beautifully because they know more about sentence grammar than the student population at a university does. Publishers buy vigorous writing, and that vigorous writing is concise. Also, it is only by knowing sentence construction, that individuals can stray fearlessly from the rules and know that they are still communicating effectively. It is time to stop running from grammar and sentence instruction and realize the importance such instruction holds. It is time to realize that if an individual can write a good sentence, then that individual is going to be, at the very least, a better writer. (Attached are pertinent quotes from famous writers.) (TB)

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# Professional Writers Teaching Professional Writing:

## Transcending the Borders between Professional Writers and Academic Scholars

## Harmonizing Thought and Reality: A Text Arguing for Teaching Sentences First, Last, and Foremost

ED 397 416

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If, as professionals from all fields tend to agree, writing has two major functions: to create experiences and to explore ideas, how can writing instructors go about teaching sentence construction and grammar?

- Writers are always the first readers of texts. Get students to re-discover that writing is a social act and help them share their delight with what they've written or demonstrate how clever they are.

- Writers don't transfer thoughts from mind to paper; they create ideas and experiences on paper. Teach how adding/deleting/moving/substituting one word, one phrase, one clause in a sentence creates new ideas.

- Writers know writing is impermanent, speech is permanent. Once uttered, speech cannot be revised--no matter how much we may try to unsay something. Teach students that reflecting on individual sentences is the first, great, and unique potential of writing. Teach students that such potential is the only sure means of changing our words that we have.

- Sometimes writers change the form of sentences to meet their ideas, and sometimes writers change their ideas to meet required forms of sentences. Teach students that sentence construction and thought are reciprocal phenomena.

- Writers are not special. All humans have the capacity for language and innate modules that acquire grammar. All humans can--and do--manipulate grammar. Composing a good sentence doesn't require an exclusive kind of background, family, economic status, education, encouragement, or creative juice. Writing a good sentence means knowing the grammar of the language--again, acquired innately and practiced consciously--and working hard.

- Writers are hardly solitary, silent individuals. When a writer comes up with a good sentence, she reads it to anyone and everyone! Composing a sentence means making noise, listening to choice phrases, exchanging ideas, exhilaration, and frustrations.

- Writers who write sentences that fit contemporary usage requirements are seldom good writers. Teach that good sentences may violate some usage shibboleth to capture the excitement of an idea.

- Writers revise sentences. Teach the 'Seam Theory of Text': that is, a revision in one sentence necessarily pushes at the seam of another sentence, forcing another revision.

- Writers revel at good sentences, particularly if they are the authors of that sentence. Consider with students, for example, why many popular (inspirational) posters are single sentences.

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- Writers in all fields creatively manipulate sentences. Successful or well-paid writers, no matter what the academic field or professional assignment--do not rely on stock words or phrases. Each sentence is a challenge to their creativity.

# Professional Writers Teaching Professional Writing:

## Transcending the Borders between Professional Writers and Academic Scholars

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Title: Harmonizing Thought and Reality: A Text Arguing for Teaching Sentences First, Last, and Foremost.

The proposition I'm here today to argue is neither radical nor unusual. In fact, most of you will rightly recognize it as a commonplace for professional writers. Yet such commonplaces, when not repeated, are often ignored and, shortly thereafter, forgotten. And that's the situation I see happening more and more: as academic scholars, of which I am one, scrutinizing the principles behind and practices of good writing, they move into theories of all flavors--some of which do more to destroy the common sense of writing that to de-mystify it. At the same time, professional writers, of which I am also one, get down to it. As a writer trying to make a buck, I know theories, philosophies, flowery prose, etc. don't bring home the pizza and beer. But, since I live in both worlds, I find that one side of my life forgets the hard-headed practicality that the other side must use and the other side tends to lose the big picture.

Or something like that. You know, that last sentence really went awry.

And that is the proposition I'm here to remind us all of: good writing is good sentences. Good writing is a first sentence that makes you want to read the second sentence. A second sentence that makes you want to read the third sentence. A third sentence that makes you want to read the fourth. Etc. In fact, 'when it comes to language, nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence. It is not fun to write lumpishly, dully, in prose the reader must plod through like wet sand. But it is a pleasure to achieve, if one can, a clear running prose that is simple yet full of surprises. This does not happen. It requires skill, hard work, a good ear, and continued practice. . ..'

When I teach, lecture, write for scholarly journals, and (even) present at conferences, I explore the importance of text, of rhetoric and rhetorical considerations (e.g., audience and purpose), of coherence and other meta-textual elements of discourse. Thinking this way I wholeheartedly endorse Erika Lindemann's admonishment that ". . .some types of sentence instruction do not use class time productively. Too much time spent analyzing someone else's sentences gives students too little practice generating their own. Too much attention to labeling sentence types or classifying phrases and clauses may teach terminology--*what* to call a construction--but not writing--*how* to create it."

But when I write--professionally, under deadlines, for money, as the more hyper half of my company B & F Writers--I start, think, and finish with sentences. Long ones. Short ones. Frequently, one-word sentences such as "No." "All my [work] literally comes to me in the form of a sentence, an original sentences which contains the entire book." Often the writing starts with sentences such as

> No, you don't know what you're talking about.
> No, you're wrong about that position.
> No, that was a horrible recommendation.
> No, I don't believe you have the slightest idea how this device actually works.

My academic persona, however, strays back to agree with Constance Weaver, Rei Noguchi, Owen Thomas, and countless other writing specialists that, while writing instructors must know grammar, direct instruction in [sentence] grammar "has a negligible effect in helping people think more clearly," that "there is little or no relationship between [sentence] grammar and composition or between [sentence] grammar and literary interpretation," that "training in formal [sentence] grammar [does] not transfer to any significant extent to writing or to recognizing correct English."

The "B" of B & F, on the other hand, knows from years of experience that my training in sentence grammar is pivotal to any professional success I have and to any sense I hold that my writing is readable. Typical of professional writers, I'm, at times, vitally concerned with clarity, brevity,

conciseness, and communicative value. Yet even when I'm this directed, I'm "interested in playing with sentence formation, seeing how long [I] can make a sentence go, or how many short sentences [I] can use without the reader's noticing." Always, when reading a sentence, I want to be positive how well it communicates. Sometimes a sentence seems clear to me when I reread it, mainly because I already know--in my head--what I'm trying to say. Hence, "I am unlikely to trust a sentence that comes easily." To give myself any feedback on my writing, I have to make sure I see, read, and hear the meaning in the individual sentences--one sentence at a time. Additionally, I know that communication certainly wouldn't fail if I submitted a restaurant review to a local paper with writing like, "Myself and my friend, we ordered the larks tongues in aspic, they was good." But I also know the editor would never hire me again!

I also know that professional writers such as Anthony Burgess, Don Murray, Stephen Pinker communicate beautifully because they know more about sentence grammar than the student population of my university. Burgess, for instance, knew exactly what he was doing with every word he wrote. Does that mean that either of my personalities believes what hr did in *A Clockwork Orange* better belongs in the category of "Kids, don't try this at home"? I think not. (Besides, I don't remember noticing bad grammar in that novel, except possibly in some of the dialogue.)

At those moments when my bifurcated personality meets up, I believe that writing should be considered as natural for anyone to learn as speech is for anyone to acquire. For me as for others, "a writer is not someone who expresses. . .thoughts,. . . passion or. . .imagination in sentences but someone who thinks sentences. A Sentence-Thinker." Someone who wants to write--or has to, as so many of our students--needs to get into his or her bones--first, last, and foremost--"the essential structure of the normal. . .sentence--which is a noble thing." That highlights another conflict. My academic side knows that I teach students to add examples, illustration, reasoning, and verve to their sentences; yet my

professional side opts for conciseness over floweriness, searches for places to cut--not expand--a sentence. As a professional I know that publishers buy vigorous writing and that "vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

Finally, it's only by knowing sentence construction that I can violate that construction, that I can fearlessly (well, maybe not fearlessly) break the rules and confidently know I'm still communicating. What I'd love for my students to know is what I practice professionally: that if I have a definite and *good* reason for breaking a rule, I should break it. One company I write for publishes newsletters. They're very strict about grammar and style, and they should be. We're trying to communicate information in a clear way, and using bad grammar would do nothing but harm our credibility. But there are other circumstances when tweaking the rules helps. Like intentionally writing sentence fragments.

So what do I advocate as an academic professional--a professional academic? an academic with another profession? a professional with academic aspirations?--?

--It's time to quit running from grammar and sentence instruction and realize the importance such instruction holds.

--It's time to realize that if we don't teach grammar and sentence construction--within all and any contexts we can find--we're doing students and future writers a major disservice.

--It's time to realize that if an individual can write a good sentence, then that individual is going to be, at the very least, a better writer.

--It's time to realize that sentence construction as that hated word "grammar is a *sine qua non* of language, placing its demons in the light of sense, sentencing them to the plight of prose."

--It's time to understand that as academics we need to take what professionals know and use it: That is, that writers "try to catch every sentence, every word you and I say, and quickly lock all

these sentences and words away in my literary storehouse because they might come in handy."

By the way, those of you would have keen ears may have recognized some of the sentences I've just uttered because you've heard to read them before. In fact, in this brief presentation I've quoted Barbara Tuchman, Karen Elizabeth Gordon, Ludwig Wittgenstein, E.B. White and William Strunk, Jr., Annie Dillard, Raymond Federman, John Gardner, William Gass, Roland Barthes, Winston Churchill, Anton Chekhov, and Edmund Wilson. Their sentences were simply too apropos to pass by. Thank you.

# Writers on Sentences

Barthes, Roland: A writer is not someone who expresses his thoughts, his passion or his imagination in sentences but someone who thinks sentences. A Sentence-Thinker.

Capote, Truman: A story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence--especially if it occurs toward the end--or a mistake in paragraphing, even punctuation.

Chekhov: I try to catch every sentence, every word you and I say, and quickly lock all these sentences and words away in my literary storehouse because they might come in handy. (*The Seagull*)

Churchill, Winston: By being so long in the lowest form [at Harrow] I gained an immense advantage over the cleverer boys. . . .I got into my bones the essential structure of the normal British sentence--which is a noble thing. (*My Early Life*)

Cowley, Malcolm: No complete son of a bitch ever wrote a good sentence.

Didion, Joan: Grammar is a piano I play by ear. All I know about grammar is its power.

Dillard, Annie: When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time year. (*The Writing Life*)

Emerson, Ralph Waldo: Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it. (*Quotation and Originality*)

Gardner, John: [A writer is] interested in discovering the secrets words carry, whether or not he ever puts them in his fiction--for instance, how 'discover' means 'to take the cover off.' He's interested in playing with sentence formation, seeing how long he can make a sentence go, or how many short sentences he can use without the reader's noticing. In short, one sign of a writer's potential is his especially sharp ear--and eye--for language. (*On Becoming a Novelist*)

Federman, Raymond: All my books literally come to me in the form of a sentence, an original sentences which contains the entire book.

Gass, William: I am unlikely to trust a sentence that comes easily.

Gordon, Karen Elizabeth: Grammar is a *sine qua non* of language, placing its demons in the light of sense, sentencing them to the plight of prose. (*The Transitive Vampire*)

Lincoln, Abraham: It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: 'And this, too, shall pass away.' How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction! (*Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society.*

*Milwaukee*, 30 September 1859)

Lonsdale, Frederick: Don't keep finishing your sentences. I am not a bloody fool. (*Child of the Twenties*)

McLuen, Marshall: The line, the continuum
--this sentence is a prime example--

"The eye--it cannot choose but to see; _____
we cannot bid the ear be still; .....
our bodies feel, where 'er they be, ----------
against or with our will." --Wordsworth
became the organizing principle of life. "As we begin, so shall we go." "Rationality" and logic came to depend on the presentation of connected and sequential facts or concepts. (*The Medium is the Massage*)

Nietzsche, Frederich: It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a whole book--what everyone else does *not* say in a whole book. (*The Twilight of the Idols*)

Saint Vincent of Lerins: Every word [of Tertullian] almost was a sentence; every sentence a victory.

Smith, Alexander: It is not of so much consequence what you say, as how you say it. Memorable sentences are memorable on account of some single irradiating word. (*On the Writing of Essays*)

Struck, William Jr., Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (*The Elements of Style*)

Thoreau, Henry David: We like that a sentence should read as if its author, had he held a plough instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow deep and straight to the end.

Thurber, James: With sixty staring me in the face, I have developed inflammation of the sentence structure and a definite hardening of the paragraphs.

Tuchman, Barbara: When it comes to language, nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence. It is not fun to write lumpishly, dully, in prose the reader must plod through like wet sand. But it is a pleasure to achieve, if one can, a clear running prose that is simple yet full of surprises. This does not happen. It requires skill, hard work, a good ear, and continued practice, as much as it takes Heifetz to play the violin. ("The Historian as Artist"

Wilson, Edmund: I attribute such success as I have had to the use of the periodic sentence. (*An Interview with Edmund Wilson*)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig: Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language. (*Zettel*)